DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 974 HE 014 561

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TITLE Why Do Students Leave the University? Draft.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (Los Angeles, CA, August 24-28, 1981). Not available in paper copy due to marginal legibility of original.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Aspiration; *College Students; *Dropout Attitudes; Dropout Research; Higher Education; Institutional Research; Questionnaires; *Rating Scales; Research Methodology; School Holding Power; Student Adjustment; *Student Attrition; Student Needs; Test Validity; *Withdrawal (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *University of Iowa

ABSTRACT

Student withdrawal from the University of Iowa was studied using an exit survey. Students' reasons for leaving the university, their future plans, and possible interventions that would have assisted the student to remain in school were assessed, along with the validity of the survey. Although there was only 62 percent agreement between the exit survey and the followup interview, it is suggested that a large majority of the withdrawing students plan to continue their education somewhere. In one section of the exit survey, students were instructed to mark any and all reasons for withdrawing. The most popular reasons for withdrawing were career plans, money, and academic reasons. However, when students were asked to state their primary reasons for withdrawing, the personal events reason was chosen by approximately one-third of the respondents, while the next most popular reason, money, was endorsed by only about one-sixth of the respondents. Some students indicated that their decision to withdraw was made from a personal perspective with regard to events occurring in their lives. It is suggested that the lack of correspondence between the two survey sections indicates a need for rewording of the exit survey. Of the total sample of 338 respondents should be allowed to mark more than one primary reasons, and to rank the importance of the reasons. It is concluded that the exit survey is a means to draw broad conclusions about the withdrawing student; however, this general information can be viewed as an initial step in institutional research. A sample questionnaire is appended. (SW)

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WHY DO STUDENTS LEAVE THE UNIVERSITY?

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The Evaluation and Examination Service

The University of Iowa

August, 1981

NE 014 561

Paper presented at the American Psychological Association annual convention, Los Angeles, 1981.

Due to changes in the university and college student population within the past five years, educators must begin to reassess the goals, delivery systems, and interventions of their institutions. Educators have finally accepted the fact that the lucrative days of the 60's and 70's have run their course. And, higher education, like other 'industries' facing leaner prospects, must redesign their future goals. Preliminary to any future goal development by educational institutions is the identification and collection of essential data. Results of surveys from students withdrawing from the university or college has great possibilities for enhancing an institution's future planning.

Gekoski and Schwartz (1961) and Demos (1968) executed research projects that used information gathered from withdrawing students as a basis for making recommendations concerning student retention. Gekoski and Schwartz studied the freshmen class at a large urban university, and compared the characteristics of a small sample of withdrawers with a small sample of continuing students. The results of this study indicated differences between the two groups on: (1) attitude toward the quality of vocational training, (2) evaluation of the faculty's ability, (3) attitude toward their advisors, (4) awareness of campus agencies, and (5) attitude toward extracurricular activities. On all dimensions the continuing students gave more favorable evaluations, were more aware, or had better attitudes than the

withdrawing students. In conclusion, Gekoski and Schwartz enumerated nine recommendations with regard to curriculum, quality of instruction, student service agencies, and future data gathering efforts. One of their strongest recommendations was for the establishment of a routine system for interviewing students who were withdrawing from the university. The rationale for these exit interviews consisted of three parts. First, by interviewing students at the time of their withdrawal from the university, it is possible to obtain information that is immediate and accurate. Second, these exit interviews would boost student morale by indicating to the student that the university was interested in their situation. And, finally, exit interviews might reveal reasons for withdrawing that possibly could be eliminated through administrative actions.

Demos (1968) studied all withdrawers at a west coast college during a single semester to discover the primary reasons for students leaving the college. Demos used an exit survey and an interview with a counselor to determine whether withdrawing students used certain defense mechanisms and/or possessed unconscious motivations which would conceal the students 'real' reason for leaving the college. The withdrawing student would complete an exit survey and then would be interviewed by a counselor. The descrepancy between the students acknowledged reasons for leaving and the counselor's perceptions of the student's reasons for leaving

was considered as evidence of defense mechanisms being used by the student. However, Demos provided no evidence for the reliability of the counselors' judgements with regard to the students reasons for withdrawing. In each case, only one counselor interviewed the withdrawing student, thereby possibly confounding the results with the individual counselors perceptual set. Ignoring this methodological weakness, this study concluded that reasons for leaving given by the students were significantly different than those reasons ascertained by the counselors. Withdrawing students primarily listed financial difficulties as their reason for leaving, while counselors oftentimes found this to be a secondary reason. Counselors found the primary reason usually to be in the motivational or poor academic performance areas. Through further analysis of the exit procedures, Demos found that : (1) withdrawing students generally had a positive attitude toward the college, (2) students did not change their reasons for withdrawing after the interview with the counselor, (3) the reasons for withdrawing were usually quite specific, and (4) the reasons had usually developed over a period of time rather than reflecting an immediate set of circumstances. Finally, Demos concluded by recommending that further exit survey research be conducted to assist colleges in more fruitful planning to reduce the number of withdrawing students.

The previously-cited studies have indicated the usefulness of the exit survey as a data gathering tool, from which general conclusions and recommendations can be made. The present study used the exit survey as a method of data collection to gather information about withdrawing students' reasons for leaving the university and their future plans. The major addition of this project to the previous knowledge base was the introduction of a validity study concerning the students' responses. If the information gleaned from an exit survey can be shown to be valid, then the confidence in the conclusions drawn from this type of survey can be increased.

The purpose of the present study was three-fold. First, it was necessary to determine the validity of the information gathered at the time of the student's withdrawal from the university. Was the information provided by the students concerning their reason for leaving valid, or were the students just completing the exit survey as quickly as possible in order to leave? A second purpose of this study was to analyze the data collected from this exit survey. The primary questions to be answered concerned the students' reasons for leaving the university, their future plans, and possible interventions that would have assisted the student to remain in school. A third purpose was to discover weaknesses in the exit survey design in order to make future data collection more useful. Finally, one minor purpose of

the project was to study relationships among student characteristics and the nature of their withdrawing from the university, and to discover weaknesses in the exit survey design in order to make future data collection more useful.

Method

Subjects

The present study examined the responses of 338 undergraduate students to an exit survey. This group consisted of all the undergraduate students who withdrew from the University of Iowa during the spring semester of the 1980-81 school year. This group was composed of 158 females (46.7%) and 180 males (53.3%).

Procedures

During the spring semester of the 1980-81 school year, all students withdrawing from The University of Iowa were required to complete an exit survey (a copy of this instrument is provided in Appendix A). The exit survey contained questions on the reasons for withdrawal, the student's future plans, and an address and telephone number at which the student could be reached in the future. The reasons for withdrawal were broken into two parts on the exit survey. In the first part, the withdrawing student checked all reasons they had for their leaving the university. In the second part, the student was asked to indicate their primary

reason for leaving. The exit survey required the student to just check off those applicable reasons for withdrawal and the information on future plans, and to fill in the required information for future contacts. The exit survey took approximately three to five minutes to complete.

After the student returned the exit survey to the administrative staff of the Registrars Office, an additional sheet of student information was completed by the staff and attached to the exit survey (a copy of this information sheet is in Appendix B). This additional sheet contained student characteristic information, such as sex, number of hours enrolled, major, cumulative GPA, and ACT Composite score. All the information collated from these exit surveys were used as the basis for the data analysis.

To determine the validity of the responses given on the exit survey, a follow-up procedure was designed. Two groups of withdrawing students were contacted approximately seven to ten weeks after leaving The University of Iowa. A telephone interview was conducted with 17 former students who had withdrawn during the first three weeks of the semester, and with 17 former students who had withdrawn from the university during weeks seven through ten of the semester. The interviews consisted of questions regarding the former students' primary reason for leaving the university, their future plans, and possible university interventions which would have assisted the students in remaining at the univer-

sity. The former students were not informed that this interview was connected to the exit survey that they had completed, unless they gave a discrepant answer on the follow-up interview. If the former student gave a different primary reason for leaving the university than the one indicated on the exit survey, they were questioned further on this discrepancy. There are a number of reasons for a possible discrepancy, and this additional questioning was used to ascertain the specific reason.

Results

The Results section is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the issue of the validity of the exit survey, while the second part deals with the general results of the exit survey.

Validity

Of the 338 completed exit surveys only 201 (59%) subjects responded to the question asking for an address and telephone number for future contacts. The subjects in the follow-up survey were chosen because (1) they provided information for future contacts and (2) were able to be contacted by telephone during the follow-up phase of the study. Two groups of withdrawers were contacted in the follow-up survey. Group 1 consisted of 17 students who had withdrawn during the first three weeks of the semester and who had

been contacted by telephone. Group 2 consisted of 17 students who had withdrawn during weeks seven through ten of the semester and had been contacted by telephone.

Table 1 presents a summary of the agreement percentages for the two follow-up groups. As indicated, 88% of the former students from Group 1 gave the same primary reason for withdrawal at the follow-up time as they indicated on the exit survey. However, only 76% of the former students in Group 2 gave the same primary reason. Overall, of the 34 former students contacted in the follow-up study, 28 (82%) of them indicated the same primary reason for withdrawal.

Studying the agreement percentages for the future plans question, 53% of Group 1 gave the same answer during the follow-up study as they gave on the exit survey. 82% of the former students of Group 2 indicated the exact same future plans as they had indicated on the exit survey. Overall, of the 34 former students contacted in the follow-up study, 21 (62%) indicated the same future plans as they had indicated on the exit survey.

General Results

Table 2 indicates the number and per cent of withdrawing students who endorsed each item on the exit survey. On section 1 of the exit survey, where students just checked any and all applicable reasons, the most popular reason for withdrawing was "I am not certain of my career directions

and goals" (33%). This response was followed by "I don't have enough money to stay in school" (27%), "I am not doing well in my classes" (25%), and "Money - other reasons" (20%). There were ten reasons that were checked by at least 10% of the respondents but less than 20%. The least popular reasons for withdrawing were "There aren't enough cultural/social/religious activities" (0%), "University procedures are too confusing" (1%), "I didn't plan to graduate when I started" (1%), and "College life isn't what I thought it was" (1%). There were 12 reasons that were checked by less than 6% of the total respondents. From Table 2 it is obvious that Social reasons were the least popular reasons checked by the respondents.

Section two of the exit survey asked each respondent to indicate their primary reason for leaving the University. Table 3 lists the results of the question. It was hoped that each respondent would mark only ONE response, but the results indicated otherwise. Of the 338 respondents, 23 subjects (7%) did not answer that question, 268 subjects (79%) indicated one reason, 40 subjects (12%) indicated two reasons, and 7 subjects (2%) indicated three reasons. Of the 268 persons who indicated only one primary reason, the most popular response was "Personal Events", checked by 118 persons (35%). The next two most popular responses were "Money", checked by 55 subjects (16%), and "Academic", checked by 38 subjects (11%). Of the persons marking two

primary reasons for withdrawing, the most popular response was "Academic and Personal Events", which was checked by 13 subjects (4%). The most astounding result from this section was that only three persons checked "Social" as their primary reason for withdrawing. Of the subjects who only marked one primary reason, none of them checked "Social". The "Social" reason was only checked in combination with other primary reasons, and then only three times.

A third type of question on the exit survey concerned the students' future plans. As on other sections of the exit survey, subjects could check more than one response. As can be seen from Table 4, 201 subjects (59%) indicated that they planned to continue their education, and 154 subjects (46%) stated they would be returning to the University of Iowa. Only 4 subjects (1%) planned no further education, and 39 subjects (12%) indicated they had no definite plans. As shown in Table 1, an issue raised by the follow-up study concerns the validity of the responses to this future plan question.

During the follow-up study the 34 former students were questioned about what the University could have done to have kept them from leaving. The results for this question are listed in Table 5. Twenty-six subjects (76%) indicated that there was nothing the University could have done to prevent their leaving. The only other responses that were indicated more than once were "More help with financial aid forms and

alternatives" and "More core classes should have been available" .

The final part of the analysis consisted of studying two questions. First, it was believed that there might be a relationship between when a student withdrew from the University and their ability to maneuver through the bureaucratic channels. It was hypothesized by the authors that students who are more sophisticated could use the system to their advantage, and would delay withdrawing until the last possible deadline, without incurring any penalty. Therefore, an analysis was performed using the week of the semester as the time factor and the ACT Composite score and the cumulative GPA as measures of the student's "bureaucratic savvy". The number of hours enrolled by the student was controlled throughout this analysis. As shown in Table 6, Pearson r correlations between week and ACT Composite score ranges from -.19 to .10 over the different levels of hours enrolled. The Pearson r correlations between week and cumulative GPA range from -.35 to .07. These results indicated a very slight relationship between the variables of interest.

The second question of interest was whether there was a relationship between the primary reason for withdrawing and the ability level of the student. In this instance, only students marking one primary reason were included in the analysis. Again, the student's cumulative GPA and their ACT

Composite score were used as measures of their ability level. A Goodman and Kruskal's lambda (asymmetric) coefficient was computed for both ACT Composite score and the cumulative GPA with the primary reason. The four lambda coefficients ranged from 0.00 to 0.04. The Goodman and Kruskal's coeffecient could range from 0 (indicating no relationship) to 1.00 (indicating a perfect one-to-one relationship). Obviously, these results indicate a lack of systematic relationship between either the ACT Composite score or the cumulative GPA and the primary reason for withdrawing given by the student.

Discussion

One of the major purposes of this study was to examine the validity of the responses to the exit survey. When constructing a survey instrument, an important issue is whether the respondents are providing 'true' responses. When students are withdrawing from college, there can be any number of pressures affecting them which might cause them to respond in a different manner than how they might respond under a non-pressurized situation. With the high rate of agreement between the exit survey and the follow-up interview on the primary reason question, it appears that for this part of the exit survey the subjects were responding in a valid manner. However, the disturbingly low rate of agreement on the question of future plans leads to a difficulty in inter-

preting the results of the exit survey on this question. Possibly, students withdrawing from the University have spent less time and thought in consideration of what they will do after they leave, thereby leading to discrepancies when interviewed six to ten weeks later on this issue. During this time after withdrawal, the former students might be able to make a more valid appraisal of their options and therefore change their plans.

A second purpose of this study was to analyze the responses to the exit survey, and to consider possible changes in the exit survey that would make it a more valuable tool. When reviewing the results of the primary reasons for withdrawing, one interesting result is the difference between the responses on the two sections of the exit survey. On the first section, where subjects were instructed to mark any and all reasons for withdrawing, a Career Planning reason, two Money reasons, and an Academic reason were the most popular reasons for withdrawing. However, when subjects were asked to state their primary reason for withdrawing, the Personal Events reason was chosen by approximately 1/3 of the subjects, while the next most popular reason, Money, was endorsed by only about 1/6 of the subjects. One clue to the explanation for this discrepancy appears to come from remarks made by subjects to the interviewer at the time of the follow-up study. Two subjects, when freely discussing their marking of the exit survey, stated that their decision

to withdraw was made from a very personal perspective with regard to events occurring in their lives, therefore they marked the Personal Events reason. It appeared that these subjects were internalizing their decision to withdraw, thereby leading them to decide on the Personal Events reason. This difficulty with the interpretation of the Personal Events reason and the lack of some correspondence between the two sections on the exit survey points to the need for some re-wording of the exit survey.

Another difficulty with the analysis and interpretation of the primary reason section on the exit survey involves the number of subjects who indicated more than ONE primary reason for withdrawing. Of the total sample of 338 subjects, 47 persons (14%) marked more than one primary reason for withdrawing. One improvement in the future use of this exit survey might be to allow persons to mark more than one primary reason, but then ask them to rank the reasons on their importance. This would allow the researcher to draw more valid conclusions about their reasons and the importance of each reason.

The interpretation of the exit survey section on future plans is clouded by the results of the validity study. As mentioned earlier, when there is only 62% agreement between the exit survey and the follow-up interview, it makes the results on the exit survey very difficult to interpret. However, allowing for a large amount of change in the future

plans of the students, it should be safe to state that a large majority of the withdrawing students do plan to continue their education somewhere. Beyond that global statement, there are no more valid conclusions that can be drawn from the future plans section. The validity of this section might be increased by reducing the number of responses options. Hopefully, this would maximize the validity, yet still provide useful information.

In conclusion, this study, like Gekoski and Schwartz (1961) and Demos (1968), supports the efficacy of the exit survey as a means to draw broad conclusions about the withdrawing student. Through the use of an exit survey, which takes the student minimal time to complete and which is easily handled by the administrative staff, it is possible to get valid information concerning general questions in the student retention area. However, this general information about student withdrawal should only be used as an INITIAL step in the description of a complex process. Future studies can use this information as a guide to develop more complex research designs to better understand the withdrawing student.

REFERENCES

Demos, G.D. Analysis of college dropouts - Some manifest and covert reasons. Personnel and Guidance Journal, 1968, 46, 681-684.

Gekoski, N. & Schwartz, S. Student mortality and related factors. Journal of Educational Research, 1961, 5, 192-194.

TABLE 1

Percent Agreement of Student Responses on Exit Survey with Follow-up Interview on 1) Primary Reason, and 2) Future Plans.

	Group 1 (N=17)	Group 2 (N=17)	Total (N=34)
% Agreement on Primary Reason	88%	76%	82%
% Agreement on Future Plans	53%	82%	62%

TABLE 2

Number and Percent of Responses to Each Item

Response	#	%
MONEY		
I don't have enough money to stay in school	90	27
I need more Financial Aid	24	7
I do not want to take out loans/am concerned about repaying loans	61	18
I and/or a family member lost/did not find a job	16	5
Other	68	20
ACADEMIC		
I am not doing well in my classes	84	25
I need help with my study skills	19	6
I don't like my classes	41	12
I am unable to get into the courses I want/need	23	7
My adviser geve me poor/inadequate advice	16	5
I am behind in my classes because of work/other commitments	106	31
University procedures are too confusing	4	1
Other	40	12
CAREER PLANNING		
I am not certain of my career directions and goals	110	33
I need time to decide on my major	40	12
My grades are too low for the major I want	32	9
The major I want is not offered here	7	2
There is a poor job market for graduates in my field	15	4
I didn't plan to graduate when I started	5	1
I have the opportunity for a job that is too good to pass up	27	8
Other	34	10
SOCIAL		
I don't have enough friends/social life	8	2
I lack time for extracurricular activities	14	4
There aren't enough cultural/social/religious activities	0	0
I am having problems with housing arrangements	11	3
I want to be closer to home	6	2
I do not feel as though I belong at The University of Iowa	24	7
Other	29	9
PERSONAL EVENTS		
I have a personal emergency such as auto accident/ operation/death in family	25	7
I am having problems with a personal relationship	42	12
I and/or my family are moving out of the area	15	4
I am feeling too much stress	58	17
Health problems have bogged me down	14	4
What I am doing here does not seem important	40	12
I'm tired of going to school	51	15
College life isn't what I thought it was	4	1
Other	32	9

TABLE 3

Number and Percent of Students Checking
Each Primary Reason.

Primary Reason	#	%
No Reason	23	7
One Reason	268	79
Money	55	16
Academic	38	11
Social	0	0
Career Planning	27	8
Personal Events	118	35
Other	30	9
Two Reasons	40	12
Money & Academic	3	1
Money & Social	1	-
Money & Career Planning	2	1
Money & Personal Events	7	2
Money & Other	2	1
Academic & Career Planning	4	1
Academic & Personal Events	13	4
Social & Personal Events	1	-
Career Planning & Personal Events	7	2
Three Reasons	7	2
Total	338	100

TABLE 4

Number and Percent of Subjects Checking Each Response.
Subjects Could Check More Than One Response.

Future Plans	#	%
I plan no further education.	4	1
I plan to continue education later by	201	59
enrolling at The University of Iowa.	154	46
entering another four year institution	29	9
entering a smaller college	13	4
entering a community college or vocational/technical school	23	7
I have no definite plans	39	12
Other	17	5

TABLE 5

Number and Percent of Student Responses at Follow-up Interview on What Action the University Could have Taken to Assist the Student in Remaining at the University.

Response	#	%
Nothing	26	76
More help with financial aid forms/alternatives	2	6
More core class availability	2	6
Provided a short-term loan	1	3
Advisor more available	1	3
Quieter dorms	1	3
Provide English-speaking instruction to foreign professors	1	3

TABLE 6

Pearson r Correlation Coefficients for Week of Withdrawal
with ACT Composite Score and Cumulative GPA by Levels of Hours Enrolled.

	Number of Hours Enrolled		
	1-6	7-11	12+
Week by ACT Composite	-.19	-.07	.10
Week by Cumulative GPA	-.20	-.35	.07

APPENDIX A

_____
Date

STUDENT EXIT SURVEY
Registrar's Office

_____
Student's Name

_____
University ID Number

SECTION ONE:

To provide better services and educational programs, we need to understand more about students who decide to withdraw from college. We are especially interested in knowing if we COULD HAVE done something to help you complete your education at The University of Iowa. This survey will help us to help other students. The information you give is voluntary and will be held in strict confidence.

Please check ( ) one or more of the following categories which influenced your decision to leave the University at this time.

MONEY
_____I don't have enough money to stay in school
_____I need more Financial Aid
_____I do not want to take out loans/am concerned about repaying loans
_____I and/or a family member lost/did not find a job
_____Other_____

ACADEMIC
_____I am not doing well in my classes
_____I need help with my study skills
_____I don't like my classes
_____I am unable to get into the courses I want/need
_____My adviser gave me poor/inadequate advice
_____I am behind in my classes because of work/other commitments
_____University procedures are too confusing
_____Other_____

CAREER PLANNING
_____I am not certain of my career directions and goals
_____I need time to decide on my major
_____My grades are too low for the major I want
_____The major I want is not offered here
_____There is a poor job market for graduates in my field
_____I didn't plan to graduate when I started
_____I have the opportunity for a job that is too good to pass up
_____Other_____

OVER

SOCIAL

_____I don't have enough friends/social life
_____I lack time for extracurricular activites
_____There aren't enough cultural/social/religious activities
_____I am having problems with housing arrangements
_____I want to be closer to home
_____I do not feel as though I belong at The University of Iowa
_____Other_____

PERSONAL EVENTS

_____I have a personal emergency such as auto accident/operation/death in family
_____I am having problems with a personal relationship
_____I and/or my family are moving out of the area
_____I am feeling too much stress
_____Health problems have bogged me down
_____What I am doing here does not seem important
_____I'm tired of going to school
_____College life isn't what I thought it was
_____Other_____

FUTURE PLANS

_____I plan no futher education
_____I plan to continue education later by
  _____enrolling at The University of Iowa
  _____entering another four year institution
  _____entering a smaller college
  _____entering a community college or vocational/technical school
_____I have no definite plans
_____Other_____

SECTION TWO:

PRIMARY REASON

The main reason for canceling my registration is

_____Money
_____Academic
_____Social
_____Career planning
_____Personal event(s)
_____Other_____

Thank you for helping us by filling out this questionnaire. If you need additional help or information, please ask to see one of our staff.

Comments:

Where will we be able to reach you?
Phone:
Address:

APPENDIX B

CODING FORM FOR EXIT SURVEY

NAME_____ SS#_____

	0-4	5-8	9-11	+12
1) Hours of Enrollment	_____	_____	_____	_____

2) College_____ Major_____

3) Sex _____ male _____ female

4) Status _____ First Time Freshman _____ First Time Transfer

_____ Former Student

5) Academic Information: _____ Cumulative GPA _____ First Semester GPA

6) Estimated Student Ability

a) ACT Composite _____

b) High School GPA _____

c) Transfer GPA _____